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European Union, Türkiye, and Privileged Partnership: Historical Roots, Legal Framework, and Contemporary Challenges

Ekrem Yaşar Akçay

Suleyman Demirel University, Türkiye, Isparta

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9157-6133>ekremakcay@sdu.edu.tr

Abstract: Türkiye has pursued European Union membership since its initial application in 1959. Despite fluctuations in political and economic relations, full membership has consistently remained a central state policy, featured in the programs of almost every government. From the early 2000s, however, certain political circles in European Union member states, particularly in Germany, France, and Austria, have promoted the idea of a privileged partnership as an alternative to accession. While this proposal was not formally accepted by either Türkiye or European Union institutions, it sparked intense debates about its definition, legal framework, and practical implications. Some stakeholders even claimed that Türkiye has functioned as a privileged partner from the beginning, given its long-standing association with the Union through the Ankara Agreement and the Customs Union. The ambiguity of the term *privileged partnership* has made it controversial in Türkiye–European Union relations. Although the notion of *privilege* generally conveys positive connotations, in Türkiye’s case it has acquired a negative meaning, perceived as a way to keep Türkiye permanently outside the European decision-making mechanisms while maintaining economic and political dependence. This study introduces a novel comparative analysis between Türkiye’s potential privileged partnership with the European Union and similar models applied to Norway, Switzerland, and Tunisia. It investigates the concept of privileged partnership within European Union discourse and compares its general application with its specific implications for Türkiye. The privileged partnership model reflects both the European Union’s internal constraints and its hesitations about Türkiye’s accession. Ultimately, the analysis highlights why a seemingly cooperative framework has become problematic and politically sensitive in the context of Türkiye–European Union relationships.

Keywords: European Union, full membership, privileged partnership, Ankara agreement, accession negotiations, Türkiye

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оригинальная статья

Европейский Союз, Турция и привилегированное партнерство: исторические корни, правовая основа и современные вызовы

Акчай Экрем Яшар

Университет имени Сулеймана Демиреля, Турция, Испарта

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9157-6133>ekremakcay@sdu.edu.tr

Аннотация: Турция стремится к членству в Европейском союзе с момента подачи заявления о присоединении в 1959 г. Несмотря на колебания в политических и экономических отношениях, достижение полноправного членства в Европейском союзе неизменно остается центральной государственной политикой почти каждого правительства. Однако с начала 2000-х гг. определенные политические круги в государствах-членах Европейского союза, особенно в Германии, Франции и Австрии, продвигали идею привилегированного партнерства в качестве альтернативы присоединения. Хотя это предложение не было официально принято институтами ни Турции, ни Европейского союза, оно вызвало бурные дебаты о его правовых

рамках и практических последствиях. Некоторые заинтересованные стороны даже утверждали, что Турция с самого начала выступала в качестве привилегированного партнера, учитывая ее давнюю связь с Европейским союзом через Анкарский договор и Таможенный союз. Двусмысленность термина *привилегированное партнерство* сделала его спорным в отношениях Турции и Европейского союза. Хотя понятие *привилегии* в целом имеет позитивный оттенок, в случае Турции оно приобрело негативный смысл, став способом постоянного удержания Турции вне европейских механизмов принятия решений с сохранением экономической и политической зависимости. Цель – провести сравнительный анализ потенциального привилегированного партнерства Турции с Европейским союзом и аналогичных моделей, применяемых в Норвегии, Швейцарии и Тунисе. Изучена концепция привилегированного партнерства в контексте дискурса Европейского союза, а также проведено сравнение ее общего применения с конкретными последствиями для Турции. Установлено, что модель привилегированного партнерства отражает как внутренние ограничения Европейского союза, так и его колебания по поводу присоединения Турции. В результате выявлены причины, по которым структура сотрудничества стала проблематичной и политически чувствительной в контексте отношений Турции и Европейского союза.

Ключевые слова: Европейский союз, полноправное членство, привилегированное партнерство, Анкарский договор, переговоры о присоединении, Турция

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Introduction

Privilege is a term that usually leaves a positive impression at first glance. The word, which essentially means the right granted to someone else, has three meanings in literature. The first meaning is advantage. The second meaning is a state-granted permission to various companies. The third meaning is historical and refers to the privilege that the Ottoman Empire granted to its non-Muslim citizens and foreign residents, regardless of political disadvantages. Privileged partnership, on the other hand, is a centuries-old concept that has only recently resurfaced on the agenda of relations between Türkiye and the European Union [1, p. 402].

In the Middle Ages, the Italian city-states developed trade with the Western states and began to acquire various powers in these regions. Italian officials, known as consuls, started operating in these areas. Over time, these powers extended not only to where their citizens resided but also to other territories. For instance, in the mid-11th century, the Italian city-states obtained a series of privileges from the declining Byzantine Empire. The Ottoman Empire provides another illustration of this practice. During the rule of Murad I in 1365, it granted trade privileges to the Republic of Ragusa in exchange for a tribute of five hundred ducats. In 1397, Byzantine envoys and consuls visiting the Ottoman Empire were granted certain rights on the condition that a Turkish quarter be established in Byzantine Constantinople,

appointing a *qadi* to manage Turkish legal affairs and a *mufti* to oversee religious matters [2, p. 82].

Abbé de Saint-Pierre used the term *privileged partnership* in the 18th century. He proposed a union of European states that would abolish wars and guarantee peace and security. With such a union, Abbe de Pierre wanted to protect European trade interests in Asia, Africa, and America and gain other advantages. Regarding the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim powers, he aimed to minimize and eliminate the threat of war by integrating them in the union. In this way, the Muslims would bolster European security while making a greater financial contribution to the Union than the other members. Likewise, the doors of neighboring Islamic countries would be opened to their trade, thus decreasing the influence of Islam over time [3]. U. Özkirimli describes this situation as a privileged partnership, claiming that the term was first used in 1957 to describe Morocco's relations with the European Economic Community but was later forgotten [4, p. 56].

Another example of the term is the Franco-German relationships between 1969 and 1984. In his study, Haig Simonian describes the two states as privileged partners. Although France was more visible and influential in the period in question, bilateral visits between Germany and France were quite frequent. Although they had different attitudes in some situations, the two

countries generally acted together and decided on a wide range of issues together, especially within the European Communities [5].

The concept of privileged partnership, which has historical roots, has recently gained attention in the context of European Union and Türkiye–European Union relations. However, its practical application in the latter case is rather complex. This study describes the evolution of the privileged partnership concept within the Türkiye–European Union relationship, its legal and political implications, and the potential outcomes for Türkiye. The main objective is to determine whether the privileged partnership serves Türkiye’s strategic interests or constrains its European Union accession goal. Initially positive, the term has undergone a negative semantic shift in the context of Türkiye and the European Union.

This paper explores the reasons behind the hostile reception of the privileged partnership narrative. The study is structured into two chapters. The first chapter delves into the discourse of the privileged partnership within the European Union, discussing its definition, content, legality, and whether any similar partnerships exist within the European Union. The second chapter focuses on the privileged partnership in Türkiye–European Union relations, demonstrating its adverse effects. A comparative approach was used to examine the status of the privileged partnership concept within the European Union and its implications when Türkiye is involved in the process.

Results

Privileged partnership in the European Union

Before discussing the concept of privileged partnership in the European Union, we need to understand the types of partnerships within the European Union, which has full members and associated members. Full membership is granted to sovereign states, enabling them to participate in all activities of the international organization and exercise the rights and obligations outlined in the founding treaties. Currently, 27 member states hold full membership. An associate member status is contingent upon a state accepting and adhering to the obligations required for membership in an international organization. However, some states may struggle to meet all conditions. Such states may opt for limited participation, known as association. Association entails a lower level of cooperation compared to full membership, extending beyond observer status [6, p. 41].

Since its foundation, the European Union has endeavored to extend its political and economic influence beyond its borders. It has engaged with states that are not eligible for full membership due to political, economic, geographical, legal, or other reasons. The European Union establishes partnership relations with these states. While these relations do not guarantee automatic membership, they allow the European Union to establish connections with states beyond its members. This provides the non-member state with a limited opportunity to participate in European Union bodies without the full obligations of membership. On the other hand, the European Union expands its sphere of influence by compensating for the deficits resulting from the capacities of the states concerned. From the perspective of the European Union, association refers to the close and privileged relations between the parties that go beyond commercial ties. The aim is to harmonize the economic and political situation of the state concerned with the common objectives of the European Union [7, p. 330].

In the early 2000s, when the relations between Türkiye and the European Union were still successful and the negotiation process was underway, some member states, such as Germany, France, and Austria, spoke out against Türkiye’s membership and proposed an alternative model [8, p. 15]. This situation has become a much-discussed topic both within the European Union and in the context of its relations with Türkiye. What is a privileged partnership for European Union officials and heads of leading member states? What is its content? Initially, it was difficult to find coherent answers to questions such as *Is there a legal infrastructure?* or *Does the European Union have this type of relationship?* Even within the European Union, the term is hollow and unfulfilled, and it is not clear how to define it. However, if the term is defined specifically for the European Union without including Türkiye, privilege can be defined as “treating a party more favorably than others”. In this case, we can define a privileged partnership as a membership model that is higher than associate membership and lower than full membership. Thus, a state that is a privileged partner of the European Union has more rights or privileges than an associate member but does not enjoy the rights or privileges of a full member¹.

There is a debate within the European Union regarding whether the concept of a privileged partnership with another country has ever been implemented. Many argue that an option such as a privileged partnership is not

¹ Akdeniz A. EU-Turkey relations: Towards a constructive re-engagement? Karaköy, İstanbul: TECEV, 2013. URL: https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report_EU_Turkey_Relations_Towards_A_Constructive_Re-engagement_EN.pdf (accessed 13 Jul 2025).

provided for in the European Union *acquis* and that the European Union has never signed such a partnership with another state. However, considering the current integration process, it can be said that the European Union has entered into similar relationships [9]. For instance, in May 1992, it signed the Agreement on the European Economic Area, which entered into force in 1994. Thanks to this agreement, the members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) have established highly integrated and mutually beneficial relationships with the European Union.

Norway, for example, gained the right to free movement of goods, capital, services, and persons through this agreement. The country also gained important rights in the areas of social policy, statistics, education, tourism, insurance, company law, transport, economic and monetary cooperation, security, consumer protection, information services, and research and technological development. However, agriculture and fisheries were excluded from the scope of the agreement due to Norway's national interests [10, p. 218]. The reason for this is that Norway is one of the most important exporters of fish and seafood. Therefore, Norway wanted to protect its interests in this area. The agreement revitalized trade between the European Economic Area, Norway, and the European Union. For instance, while Norway exports 80% of its total exports to the European Union, 70% of its imports come from the European Union [11]. Although Norway cooperates closely with the European Union and has the right to consult experts when the European Commission drafts legislation, it has no voting rights in the decision-making mechanism. In its turn, Norway must accept laws and directives introduced by the European Union institutions at the specified time and in the specified form. At the same time, Norway must bear the costs of participating in various European Union programs. This situation highlights the disadvantages of the agreement.

Switzerland was another country the European Union has entered into special relationship with. In 1972, the European Union concluded a free trade agreement with Switzerland and opened its market to Swiss goods. This means that the relationship includes the free movement of goods. However, the free movement

of services, the free movement of workers, and the free movement of capital are excluded from the relationship between Switzerland and the European Union. As these areas are the most important sectors of the Swiss economy, Switzerland did not want to share these areas with the European Union. In addition, the bilateral agreements improve relations in aviation, transport and research, the public sector, processed agricultural products, defense and security, and lifelong learning². However, Switzerland refused to join the European Economic Area in an attempt to maintain its sovereignty while strengthening its relations through bilateral agreements. In this way, Switzerland's relations with the European Union are limited compared to the European Economic Area and proceed in their way. Unlike the European Economic Area members, Switzerland does not automatically adopt European Union legislation on terms and schedules dictated by Brussels [12, p. 417].

The European Union signed a privileged partnership agreement with Tunisia on November 19, 2012. This marked the first agreement where the European Union had engaged in a privileged partnership with a third country. The primary goal of this agreement was to support Tunisia's democratic transition in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and to enhance collaboration between the two parties across various sectors. The rationale behind selecting Tunisia for this agreement was its significant support to the European Union during the Arab Spring. The agreement encompassed cooperation in politics, economy, and social affairs, as outlined in the Official Journal of the European Communities in 1994. Furthermore, the European Union collaborated with Tunisia on its involvement in European Union agencies and programs, as well as provide technical and financial aid³. Over the course of the five-year agreement, the European Union committed to working closely with Tunisia to rejuvenate and fortify the Tunisian economy and its standing in the Mediterranean region⁴. In this way, the European values were spread internationally and contribute to the development of democratic transformation in Tunisia after the Arab Spring. On the other hand, economic revitalization and cooperation in the field of migration prevented illegal

² The European Union and Switzerland. *Delegation of the European Union to Switzerland and Liechtenstein*. 30 Jul 2021. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/switzerland/european-union-and-switzerland_en?s=180 (accessed 15 Jun 2025).

³ Privileged partnership: Moving EU-Tunisia cooperation to a higher level. *European Commission*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/archives/commission_2010-2014/fule/headlines/news/2012/11/20121119_en.htm (accessed 16 Jul 2025).

⁴ Council decision on the Union position within the Association Council set up by the Euro Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the European Community and its Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Tunisia, of the other part, with regard to the adoption of the document: "Strengthening the EU-Tunisia privileged partnership: Strategic priorities for the period 2018–2020". *European Commission*. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0009&from=DE> (accessed 16 Jul 2025).

migration and ensured collaboration in the fight against organized crime⁵. The European Union has also expressed its intention to offer a similar agreement to Israel and Palestine. Aiming to contribute to the Middle East peace process, the European Union intends through this agreement to collaborate with the two countries in such areas as regional development, culture, and education. This initiative is designed to secure economic benefits by providing the European Union access to the Israeli and Palestinian markets⁶.

From the outset, the European Economic Area aimed to achieve deep and intensive economic integration between the European Free Trade Association and the European Union. The agreement with Tunisia and the proposed agreements with Israel and Palestine offer an alternative path to European Union integration. From this point of view, the European Union can enter into such a relationship with Türkiye, which it calls privileged partnership. However, if this partnership or relationship standard is to be applied to all third countries in the same way, it will not be in the form of an agreement, but in the form of arrangements that will vary according to the situation of each country and the international conjuncture. Therefore, the content of a Privileged Partnership Agreement presented to Türkiye will also vary. On the other hand, the legal basis for this relationship is Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union⁷. According to this article, the European Union should develop special relations with neighboring countries to create an area of prosperity and good neighborliness based on European values and characterized by closer and more peaceful relations based on cooperation. To this end, the European Union may conclude special agreements with the countries concerned. These agreements may include reciprocal rights and obligations, as well as the possibility of joint activities. It conducts regular consultations on the implementation of these agreements. In other words, Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union provides for the establishment of special relations with neighboring countries and aims to create a zone of prosperity through these relations, to promote

European values to third countries and to develop closer relations rooted in cooperation⁸.

Privileged partnership in Türkiye–European Union relations

Regarding the definition of privileged partnership in Türkiye and the European Union with its material and legal infrastructure, the situation changes and becomes confusing. The main reason for this is the Association Agreement between Türkiye and the European Union, also known as the Ankara Agreement, which was concluded on September 12, 1963⁹ [13]. The Ankara Agreement is an association agreement between the European Union and Türkiye under Article 238 of the Treaty of Rome, establishing the European Economic Community. The Association Agreement is a mixed agreement between the European Union and third countries. Legally speaking, both the European Union and the member states are parties to the agreement. The term *partnership* first appeared in the Ankara and Athens Agreements, which are comprehensive agreements that have not been concluded with any other third country.

The Ankara Agreement is a framework agreement consisting of 33 articles of the main agreement, a provisional protocol with 11 articles, a financial protocol with nine articles, a final act, and exchange of letters regarding labor cooperation. It also includes a Memorandum of Understanding, two interpretative declarations, and two declarations by the German government. It defines only the general rules that are to apply in relations with the European Union and provides a brief framework. The articles of the Ankara Agreement describe the purpose of the association relations, the principles of the customs union, its definition, the free movement of goods, persons, capital, and services (the four freedoms), transport, competition, harmonization of legislation, economic and trade policy, the association bodies, the possibilities of Türkiye's full membership, and the settlement of disputes that may arise in the association relations. As stated in Article 2, the agreement bolsters the development of Turkish economy to raise the level of employment and

⁵ On the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with Turkey. Council Decision 2006/35/EC of 23 Jan 2006. *European Union*. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32006D0035> (accessed 16 Jul 2025).

⁶ Ahren R. EU offers "unprecedented" aid to Israelis, Palestinians for peace deal. *The Times of Israel*. 16 Dec 2013. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/eu-offers-unprecedented-aid-to-israelis-palestinians-for-peace-deal/> (accessed 15 Jul 2025).

⁷ Document 12016M008. Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. Official Journal of the European Union. Title I – Common Provisions. Article 8. *European Union*. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M008> (accessed 9 Jul 2025).

⁸ Hillion C. The EU neighbourhood competence under article 8 TEU. *Jacques Delors Institute*. 19 Feb 2013. URL: <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/the-eu-neighbourhood-competence-under-article-8-teu/> (accessed 1 Sep 2025).

⁹ EU-Turkey Association Agreement (the "Ankara Agreement"). *Delegations European Parliament*. URL: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/d-tr/documents/eu-texts> (accessed 9 Jul 2025).

the standard of living of the Turkish people. Although the agreement emphasizes the economic aspects, it also has a political aspect. According to the Ankara Agreement, economic integration is to be achieved first, followed by the transition to political integration, eventually leading to full integration. On the other hand, Article 28 states that the parties will fulfill the obligations arising from the agreement establishing the European Union. According to this article, while the association relationship was seen as a binding precursor to Türkiye's eventual membership, it was also seen as an opportunity to test the European Union. In other words, Article 28 contained no promise to join the European Community. In this context, relations were left to an open-ended process, closing the door to Türkiye's automatic accession to the European Union. However, Article 28 imposed obligations on the parties to be fulfilled when the time came and the conditions materialized [14, p. 241].

The Ankara Agreement is also seen in some circles as an optimistic agreement. The goal is to prepare Türkiye for full membership. Even though there is no obligation to participate, it signifies that Türkiye is eligible for full membership. Since states with which association relations are established cannot participate in the European Union's organizational structure and decision-making mechanisms, the Ankara Agreement established the Association Council to manage relations between the European Union and Türkiye [15, p. 45–47]. The Association Council is a bilateral structure that can make binding and consultative decisions; it discusses and decides on relations with the European Union. Consensus is sought in the Council, with each side having one vote [16]. Although the Association Council is the primary organ of relations between Türkiye and the European Union, its powers are outlined in Articles 22 and 25 of the Agreement. Additionally, according to Article 23, the Association Council establishes committees and authorizes them to ensure the Agreement's positive development and provide support. The Association Council has a structure that cannot determine its powers; it cannot create new powers independently. Its powers are limited by the Ankara Agreement. However, the Ankara Agreement delegates to the Association Council the authority to determine the necessary details for achieving the objectives. In this sense, the Association Council is also responsible for matters not explicitly included in the Agreement. On the other hand, the Association Council may make

necessary decisions, if joint action by the Parties is deemed necessary, to achieve one of the objectives outlined in the Agreement, even if it is not explicitly included. However, this does not imply that the Agreement should be revised. Doing so would require amending the agreement or the partnership [17, p. 92].

The Ankara Agreement is divided into three separate periods: the preparatory period, the transitional period, and the final period. The preparatory stage lasts five years, which can be extended up to 11 years, if needed. During this process, Türkiye would not make any commitments while the European Union would provide financial support and open tariff quotas for some agricultural products. For instance, the European Union has already opened its quotas for dried figs, raisins, tobacco, hazelnuts, cotton, etc. [18, p. 114].

The second stage is the transitional period, which should not exceed twelve years. If the Association Council examines Türkiye's economic situation and deems it necessary and sufficient, it will authorize the start of the transitional period through the so-called Additional Protocol. During this period, Türkiye will assume obligations based on reciprocity and balance.

During the last stage, the Customs Union, as it is officially called, will form the basis for strengthening the coordination between the economic policies of the contracting parties [19, p. 43].

The Ankara Agreement is an association agreement between the European Union and a third country. This agreement was one of the first such association agreements, making it more comprehensive than the Stabilization and Association Agreements. It is even considered the prototype of the Treaty of Rome. While the Ankara Agreement establishes an association relationship between Türkiye and the European Union, its primary goal is to secure Türkiye's full membership in the European Union. The Privileged Partnership Agreement, which could be an alternative partnership option for Türkiye, is also acknowledged alongside full membership¹⁰.

The privileged partnership option was proposed by French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 2000. Subsequently, the idea was supported by German leader Angela Merkel and the Christian Democrats in certain member states like France, Austria, and the Netherlands. This proposal was put forward by groups that are not in favor of Türkiye obtaining full European Union membership [20, p. 157]. The privileged partnership is a suggestion made by center and far-right groups

¹⁰ Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part. *European Council. Council of the European Union*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents/treaties-agreements/agreement/?id=2006040> (accessed 22 Jul 2025).

in countries that opposed Türkiye's full membership but did not wish to sever ties completely. With this option, Türkiye does not entirely close the doors to the European Union, but its own movements within the European Union are restricted. Türkiye's right to free movement is met with apprehension due to concerns about illegal migration, border security issues, and fears of increased unemployment within the European Union. While the privileged partnership does not guarantee complete freedom in this aspect, it does mention some concessions [21]. According to Angela Merkel, the insufficient security at Turkish borders cannot prevent illegal immigration, and so granting full freedom of movement to Türkiye would not be advantageous for the European Union¹¹. However, it is anticipated that the challenges Turkish citizens face in obtaining Schengen visas will be somewhat alleviated. This could involve simplifying visa application procedures, reducing visa fees, shortening processing times, and minimizing the documentation required for visa issuance. This streamlining would enable quicker and easier visa issuance for longer durations and multiple entries. This would facilitate more frequent travel for managers, business representatives, and academics, while also reducing the financial risk associated with visas. However, there are counterarguments suggesting that Türkiye may not be interested in these concessions if the European Union does not offer visa-free travel. Nonetheless, the European Union is unlikely to grant Türkiye unrestricted freedom of movement [22, p. 59]. Therefore, it is proposed that the most practical approach to entering the privileged partnership framework would be to provide certain concessions and benefits regarding free movement¹².

The privileged partnership option appears to be a backup plan for Türkiye without causing significant harm to the country [23, p. 547]. Despite Türkiye's commitment to full membership, many within the European Union do not share this vision and are unwilling to support its membership under any circumstances¹³. Michel Rocard suggests that Türkiye is unlikely to gain support for full membership unless the European perception of Türkiye changes. Consequently, the privileged partnership option is viewed as a collaboration aimed at making Türkiye reliant on the European Union instead of pursuing

European Union membership¹⁴. The privileged partnership allows Türkiye to engage in all European Union policies but excludes participation in its decision-making processes [24, p. 39–42]. The Ankara Agreement, which establishes a partnership relationship between Türkiye and the European Union, sets full membership as the ultimate goal for Türkiye, but the concept of non-full membership in the privileged partnership option puts Türkiye at a disadvantage [25, p. 33]. In a normal scenario, a privileged partnership is typically seen as a level of partnership below full membership. However, in Türkiye's case, it is viewed as a relationship model even lower than a partnership relationship. Consequently, the privileged partnership option for Türkiye results in both a semantic and relational ambiguity. Türkiye rejects the idea of a privileged partnership because its sole aim is European Union membership and views such a relationship offers as unethical. This is because Türkiye deems it unethical to adhere to the European Union's entire policy without having a say in the decision-making processes [26].

Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Austria, where the privileged partnership option is often considered, have center-right and far-right groups that oppose Türkiye's European Union membership. The main reason for their opposition is the presence of many immigrants of Turkish origin living in these countries. These immigrants face challenges in integrating into the local society due to religious and cultural differences. While these countries acknowledge their internal integration issues, they are concerned that granting full European Union membership to Türkiye could exacerbate integration problems and potentially harm the European Union as a whole [27, p. 93]. They argue that opting for a privileged partnership over full membership would better serve the European Union's interests by avoiding potential damage. However, Türkiye's full membership would significantly increase its influence in the decision-making processes, given its large population. Consequently, even if Türkiye collaborated with other European Union member states rather than acting independently, it could reshape the institutional structure by preventing decisions from being dominated solely by the Franco-German axis. The center-right and far-right groups in these countries, wary about this shift

¹¹ Turkey PM slams Merkel stance on EU bid, migrants: paper. *Reuters*. 2 Nov 2011. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-germany-erdogan-bild-embargoed/turkey-pm-slams-merkel-stance-on-eu-bid-migrants-paper-idUKTRE7A07O320111101> (accessed 7 Jul 2025).

¹² Barysch K. Is Turkey our partner now? *Centre for European Perform*. 28 Nov 2011. URL: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2011/turkey-our-partner-now> (accessed 14 Jul 2025).

¹³ Barysch K. What Europeans think about Turkey and why. *Centre for European Perform*. 25 Sep 2007. URL: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/essay/2007/what-europeans-think-about-turkey-and-why> (accessed 12 Jun 2025).

¹⁴ Arısan-Eralp N. Türkiye-AB ilişkilerinde Yeni Arayışlar ("Mecburiyet" ve "İyi Niyet" in Ortaya Çıkardığı Yeni Formüller). *TEPAV*, 2010. URL: https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1288707664-4.Turkiye_AB_Iliskilerinde_Yeni_Arayislar.pdf (accessed 10 Jun 2025).

in power dynamics, oppose Türkiye's full membership. As an alternative, they advocate for the privileged partnership option [28, p. 46].

In other words, the concern that Turkish citizens will emigrate to the European Union *en masse* if Türkiye becomes a full member has led to the privileged partnership option proposed by the center and far-right groups of some European Union countries. These countries fear that the migration may increase the existing unemployment, reducing the prosperity levels for European residents. Furthermore, opponents of Türkiye's accession argue that shifting the Union's external borders to conflict-prone regions could compromise overall European border security. These elements are against Türkiye's full membership because it would harm the national interests of these states [29, p. 766]. However, Türkiye cannot be left out of the European Union completely: Türkiye is important for European economic, geopolitical, defense, and security issues; Türkiye is an important market for European Union countries; the Customs Union has fostered trade on both sides. For this reason, these political circles believe that a relationship without full membership, i.e., the so-called privileged partnership that involves more intensive cooperation with the European Union, would be beneficial for both sides [30, p. 183].

Conclusion

Privileged partnership is no different from the European Union's partnership relations with third countries. Moreover, it risks downgrading Türkiye's legal status to a level less favorable than that afforded by the foundational Ankara Agreement. In terms of content, this agreement constitutes an economic area that includes the free movement of goods, capital, services, and persons.

However, Article 28 of the Ankara Agreement provides for an Association Agreement leading to full membership: "As soon as the operation of this Agreement has advanced far enough to justify envisaging full acceptance by Türkiye of the obligations arising out of the Treaty establishing the Community, the Contracting Parties shall examine the possibility of the accession of Türkiye to the Community"¹⁵. In this sense, it is recognized that the Ankara Agreement provides for full membership through the above-mentioned article. Therefore, from a legal point of view, Türkiye will fall behind the Ankara Agreement with the privileged partnership option. The privileged partnership does not constitute a departure from the Ankara Agreement, but rather offers a re-envisioned framework for its implementation.

Accordingly, after the goal of full membership envisaged in the Ankara Agreement has become more uncertain, it will reveal the implementation of other provisions of the Agreement. In this sense, the privileged partnership will include Türkiye's renunciation of full membership and the functioning of the parts of the Ankara Agreement that do not work. For this, the agreement will have to be revised. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to consider a privileged partnership as a separate agreement from the Association Agreement with third countries.

However, the fact that the option is not discussed very often has led to discussions suggesting that it has fallen off the agenda. Nonetheless, the infrequency of discussions about this option should not imply that it has been disregarded. This option was not directly proposed to Türkiye by any of the European Union's supranational institutions. It was primarily suggested by the center and far-right factions in Germany, France, Austria, and the Netherlands. These factions oppose Türkiye's membership in the European Union due to their interests but also do not advocate for Türkiye's complete exclusion from the European Union. Conversely, the rejection of Türkiye's full membership by these factions and the proposal of a privileged partnership, although different, are generally favored due to religious and cultural disparities. Concerns include potential negative impacts on the European Union's institutional structure, financial resources, migration, unemployment, integration issues, and Türkiye's existing challenges related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

The groups proposing the privileged partnership option are influenced in their decisions mainly by their domestic policies, the ideologies of non-governmental organizations and political leaders, and the attitude of public opinion towards Türkiye. In other words, although the governments, political leaders, and their ideologies are active in this process, the leaders primarily produce domestic policies that correspond to their internal structures and the attitudes of their public opinion, reflecting these as foreign policies. Non-state actors within the state also influence this process. These foreign policies attempt to shape the supranational structure of the European Union. In this way, they try to remain in power without losing votes at home.

For the groups in the aforementioned states, full membership of Türkiye in the European Union will significantly undermine their vital interests in many areas. On the other hand, a complete exclusion of Türkiye

¹⁵ EU-Turkey Association Agreement...

from the European Union would harm the vital interests of these states, as Türkiye is an important market. This is because distancing Türkiye from the European Union creates the possibility of instability in some areas, such as democracy and human rights. This situation will lead to a deterioration of existing relations in political and economic terms for the groups within the states that are opposed Türkiye's full membership in the European Union. The groups that do not want to take such a risk believe that a model that keeps Türkiye out of the decision-making mechanism prevents the deterioration of the existing institutional structure. they think that the current relations in economic and political terms through ever-closer cooperation with Türkiye is better for both sides. At the same time, this will lead to an easing of public opinion in these states. This is because the population of Turkish origin in these states has major problems with integration, and public opinion is dissatisfied with this. Fearing that the situation will aggravate after Türkiye becomes a full member, the opponents insist on privileged partnership instead of full membership.

Although there are opinions that the privileged partnership option is not part of the European Union *acquis*, the option is legally based on Article 8 of the Treaty on European Union. According to this article, the Union may enter into special relations with third countries based on European values and ensure closer cooperation. The first privileged partnership agreement was with Tunisia. In this sense, the European Union can conclude such an agreement with Türkiye. However, the content of the agreement in question is not standard. For instance, the European once offered a Privileged Partnership Agreement to Israel and Palestine. The Privileged Partnership Agreements to be concluded will differ from country to country, depending on the situation in these countries. Whether Türkiye accepts this option or not will also depend on its ability to stand up to the European Union and the benefits it will derive from this option. In the current situation, Türkiye sees full membership as its main goal. Therefore, it is unlikely to accept the privileged partnership option at the moment. This is one of the reasons why the option has disappeared from the agenda even within the European Union. For the European Union, the option under discussion depends above all on Türkiye giving up its goal of full membership and accepting a privileged partnership.

The analysis of Türkiye–European Union relations reveals that the concept of privileged partnership, while theoretically a positive and flexible form of engagement for third countries, assumes a distinctly negative connotation when applied to Türkiye. In recent years, Türkiye has actively sought to revise the dynamics of this

relationship by strengthening regional cooperation, energy diplomacy, and customs union modernization efforts, signaling its intent to transform its status beyond that of a passive partner. Historically, Türkiye has pursued full membership in the European Union as a consistent state policy, reinforced by the legal and institutional framework of the Ankara Agreement (1963). This agreement not only establishes a structured pathway toward accession but also positions Türkiye as a partner with obligations and rights that extend beyond typical association agreements.

The privileged partnership proposal for Türkiye, initially suggested by center-right and far-right groups in Germany, France, Austria, and the Netherlands, emerges from a combination of domestic political concerns, migration fears, security considerations, and perceived challenges in integrating Turkish-origin populations into their societies. While these proposals ostensibly aim to maintain cooperation with Türkiye without granting full membership, they represent a regressive legal and political framework compared to the Ankara Agreement. Traditional privileged partnerships enhance economic and political collaboration without threatening a third country's sovereignty. In Türkiye's case, however, privileged partnership risks curtailing its decision-making influence, restricting participation in European Union institutions and undermining its long-term goal of full integration.

Moreover, the privileged partnership raises broader questions about equity and consistency in privileged partnership external relations. Whereas similar agreements with Tunisia, Israel, and Palestine are largely sector-specific and context-dependent, the application of such a model to Türkiye would contradict its historical trajectory as a candidate country with full membership aspirations. The gap between Türkiye's high expectations and the European Union's minor concessions highlights a structural problem: how to balance Türkiye's strategic and economic power with the European Union's internal political and social doubts.

From a strategic perspective, this study suggests several key implications for Türkiye. Vigilant monitoring of European reforms and policy shifts is essential, as the evolution of European Union institutions and enlargement policies will directly affect the feasibility and design of alternative partnership models. Continued alignment with European Union accession criteria in areas such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and economic reforms will strengthen Türkiye's negotiating position and reinforce its credibility as a full member candidate. Proactive diplomatic engagement with both European institutions and individual member states can mitigate domestic concerns and promote a narrative

that highlights Türkiye's contribution to European strategic, economic, and security objectives. Public diplomacy and communication strategies are necessary to address misconceptions and domestic opposition within member states, particularly around migration and integration issues.

The realization of the privileged partnership option will depend on its adoption as a result of the negotiations between Türkiye and the European Union member states. The fact that this option exists will hinge on the future structuring of the European Union. Once the structuring is finalized, it will become clear what Türkiye's place in the European Union will be and whether the privileged partnership option will be viable. Türkiye should closely monitor the future structure of the European Union, staying informed about all aspects of this structure to meet all the necessary conditions for full membership as soon as possible. Only by doing so will Türkiye be able to take significant steps towards full membership and prevent the proposal of non-full membership models like the privileged partnership. This approach is crucial for Türkiye to counteract the negative public opinion towards the European Union.

While the concept of Privileged Partnership is legally and politically feasible, its adoption for Türkiye would

undermine the strategic and legal gains achieved through the Ankara Agreement and contradict the long-standing goal of full European Union membership. The article concludes that Türkiye should continue pursuing reforms aligned with European standards while diplomatically advocating for the modernization of the Customs Union as a concrete, equitable alternative to privileged partnership models. The long-term solution lies not in accepting a diminished status but in safeguarding Türkiye's membership aspirations through strategic diplomacy, legal preparedness, and domestic reforms. Recognizing the complexities of European politics and domestic considerations in member states is essential for Türkiye to maintain its agency and maximize the benefits of any cooperative framework, whether as a full member or in the context of a negotiated partnership.

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